

Sophocles' *Ajax*: crises of war and heroism

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Sophocles' tragedy *Ajax* was one of the most popular and well-known tragedies in the ancient world, and is currently enjoying a revival. What are the reasons for the play's enduring appeal? What makes it so memorable, and in what ways does it explore some of the most perplexing and disturbing issues in ancient and modern society?

Asked to name three all-time favourites among Sophocles' surviving tragedies, most people might think of *Oedipus the King*, *Antigone*, and *Electra*, but looking back over tragedy's long life of more than 2500 years they might well find *Ajax* competing for attention and often leading the field. How can we begin to rate a play's standing over such a long period? Not just because a play won first prize in the original competition: plenty of hits in their own day were soon forgotten. Clearly there had to be a whole range of different factors, such as popularity with actors and audiences in revivals staged at dramatic festivals, imitation by later tragedians, Greek or Roman, subject matter which could always seem 'relevant' in other times, however strong its appeal to the interests of the original community, and plenty of memorable lines, adaptable to any number of different situations.

Ajax must have scored on all these counts: by the end of antiquity it was so well known from quotations that it must have felt like a 'standard text', even though the ancient educational system didn't have exams or set books; and later, at a time when you might have thought studying Greek tragedy wasn't high on the agenda, a Byzantine bishop (Arethas in the 10th century) could remark that 'every schoolboy' knew the play. And it went on being used by teachers: more manuscripts survive of this play than of any other by Sophocles, and many of these, from the Renaissance onwards – followed in due course by printed texts – were produced for students of Greek in the West. So *Ajax* was often the obvious choice in British schools as the first Sophocles play that pupils studied; perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that it was chosen to be put on in 1882, as the first Cambridge Greek Play. It may not have been staged as often as some others in the 20th century, but currently it is enjoying a remarkable new

lease of theatrical life.

Memorable scenes from the play

Ajax of Salamis was a big man and a great fighter, famous in the *Iliad* for his great exploits, and generally recognised as second only to Achilles. Bad things happened to him after the fall of Troy, as told in the epic tradition: after Achilles' death there was a contest between Ajax and Odysseus for his famous golden armour, which Odysseus won, possibly by suspect means. Ajax's defeat drove him into homicidal rage against his comrades, especially their leaders Agamemnon and Menelaus, who were only saved by a mad fit which caused Ajax to kill cattle instead of killing them. Ajax then committed suicide by falling on his sword.

This was the central episode in his story, well known from many different versions in art before the tragedians made him a leading character. Athenian audiences watching Sophocles' play would have seen a trilogy by Aeschylus in which (as usual in tragic performances) the suicide happened off-stage and was narrated by a messenger, but Sophocles introduced a stunning innovation, making spectators believe they actually saw the suicidal fall. As one ancient commentator noted (on 864): 'One must imagine that he falls on his sword, and the actor must be strongly built in order to make the audience visualize Ajax doing it; as people say of Timotheos of Zakynthos, that his acting carried along and enthralled the spectators so much that he was nicknamed 'Sphageus' ('Slayer': the word Ajax uses of his sword at 815).

There are plenty of other things in the play to capture the attention of audiences: it opens with the goddess Athena explaining to Odysseus that she has driven Ajax mad to stop him from killing the Greek

leaders, and she stages a horrific little display for his benefit. Odysseus, so often portrayed in drama as a deceitful schemer, responds with pity for his old comrade, and refuses to exult, and in the end he is the one who persuades Agamemnon that the corpse should be given proper burial. But the main focus of the first half of the play is on Ajax's reactions as he sits surrounded by the slaughtered cattle and begins to grasp, with intense shame, what he has done, or failed to do: he shows no regret for having tried to kill his comrades. The only way out that he can see is suicide, although his devoted crew and his concubine Tecmessa try to deflect him, and to believe that he has changed his mind when he says he will go to the seashore to purify himself and 'bury his sword' (654–9). He has shown tenderness, in his own brusque, if not brutal, way, towards his family, particularly the child Eurysaces, who is with him in the camp, but in his final speech, alone on the shore, Ajax calls down curses on the 'whole Greek army'.

No wonder that the question of what to do with the dead Ajax has enormous importance in the second half of the play, where his half-brother Teucer tries to make the case for proper burial against the unprepossessing Agamemnon and Menelaus. And if Teucer's role was designed (as it may well have been) to be played by the lead actor who had earlier played Ajax, this would give special power to the solemn funeral procession with which the tragedy ends, prefiguring his role in cult as one of the great Attic heroes and the importance of his son, Eurysaces, who also had a sanctuary in the city.

Topical issues: the contemporary resonance of Sophocles' *Ajax*

For Athenians watching the play, the choice of setting and chorus must have had special appeal. The scene is outside Troy, on the beach-head where Ajax has his huts and ships. This could simply be a desolate place, as it is when the chorus sing of being stuck there in the damp encampment (1206–10), but it's coloured by their evocations of home, 'famous Salamis' (ruled by Telamon, Ajax's

father), and their longing to be sailing back and seeing the wooded promontory of Sunium. But for all the nostalgic attraction of some of the choral songs and dances, and the solemnity of the ending, the play explores multiple problems which are left unsolved. Some of these themes must have had special political or social significance for contemporaries, but they are hard to pin down without a firm date for the play. Sophocles was active in dramatic competitions over a very long period (his first victory is recorded as 468, and he died in 406/5), so we can only guess what the play's topical implications might have been. In any case, Greek tragedians typically preferred to set their plays at a distance of time, and often of place, from the here and now of their audience, leaving it to the spectators to spot ways in which their chosen take on an old story made sense.

One rather obvious point that might be picked up comes at 1102. When Teucer says to the arrogant Menelaus, intent on refusing the burial of Ajax, 'You came [to Troy] as king of Sparta, not as ruler over us', his words may have chimed with contemporary Athenian anti-Spartan feeling, but this is not a major theme, and much deeper issues run through the play. For example, in *Ajax* – as in *Antigone* or Euripides' *Suppliant Women* – the question whether or not burial should be given to someone who could be identified as a traitor is a major focus of debate, and this clearly was an issue that mattered a great deal in fifth-century relations between city-states.

Another hot topic in *Ajax* is the question of legitimate birth and status. Tecmessa, born a Phrygian princess, calls Ajax her 'master' and herself his 'slave' (485–9) in a powerful speech reminding him that all human fortune is subject to change, and begging him not to commit suicide. What she says, echoing Andromache's plea to Hector in *Iliad* 6, helps to give focus to the future of their child Eurysaces: will he live to succeed Ajax and inherit his kingdom, or (by implication) suffer the same fate as Andromache's son? Teucer, as Ajax's half-brother, son of King Telamon and a Trojan princess, is insulted by Agamemnon as 'son of a captive woman' (1228), and Teucer in turn has rude things to say about Agamemnon's family history. This insistence on legitimacy may relate to questions that Athenians found urgently pressing: Pericles' citizenship law of 451/50 had changed the definition of Athenian citizenship, requiring both parents to be of citizen descent. But it could equally reflect a broader concern about the definition of an individual's true identity and value, a concern which is crucial for thinking about Ajax himself.

The madness of war – then and now

Very recently, directors in the USA have recognised how powerfully plays like *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* (and one might add Euripides' *Heracles*) can resonate with war veterans and their families, and more generally with audiences conscious of the damage that experience of warfare can do to individuals and societies, and the madness it can provoke. Ajax, always in the past a winner in physical contests and military exploits, trained to use extreme violence in a disciplined way, finds that he can also be disastrously destructive. One director, Peter Meineck, whose company Aquila performed scenes from *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* in New York in 2009, recalls that in the discussion after the show a veteran stood up. 'He said, "I've never spoken about this before; I never knew a play was written about me. I am Ajax; I wanted to kill my commanding officer"'. If you want to understand catharsis, watch veterans watch a Greek play.'

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